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## Menorah Review (No. 22, Spring, 1991)

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# MENORAH

## REVIEW



NUMBER 22 • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • SPRING 1991

### For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

#### The Christian-Jewish Encounter

*Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response*

by Robert Chazan  
Berkeley: University of California Press

A Review Essay by  
Leon J. Weinberger

The title of the volume is an adaptation of Friar Raymond Martin's *Pugio Fidei*, the influential manual for the Christian mission to the Jews and the crowning achievement of his monumental study *Capistrum Judeorum* completed in 1267. The Christian missionizing efforts among 13th century European Jews has been the subject of studies by Yitzhak Baer, Salo Baron, Solomon Grayzel, Amos Funkenstein, Hyman Maccoby, David Berger, William Herskowitz and Jeremy Cohen among others in recent years. Chazan's volume, in addition to serving as a useful review of the innovative Christian missionizing efforts and Jewish responses from 1240 to 1280 argues against the opinion of Jeremy Cohen (in his *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* [Ithaca, 1982]) that "the Dominicans and Franciscans . . . sought to implement a new Christian ideology with regard to the Jews, one that allotted the Jews no legitimate rights to exist in European society." (Chazan, p. 2)

In opposing Cohen's thesis, Chazan argues there is no evidence that the "legitimate rights" of the Jews were curtailed and cites (p. 176) the Church's formulation with regard to the Jews in its *Constitutio pro Judeis*: "Just as the Jews ought not enjoy license to presume to do in their synagogues more than permitted by law, so too in those (privileges) conceded to them they should not suffer curtailment." Chazan's argument

here is beside the point. Cohen is making a case that the Friars attempted to advance a program that would deprive Jews of their rights, not that they succeeded. And with some exceptions, such as the occurrences in Valreas, Troyes, Aragon and Navarre in 1247, 1288, 1305 and 1328 respectively, and other "sporadic incidents" (Cohen, p. 44), they didn't succeed in overturning the canonical regulations that tolerated the Jewish presence in Christian Europe.

Influential as they were, the Dominicans and Franciscans in the 13th century had to contend with the often divergent considerations of both Church and State with regard to the Jews. Witness the position of King James of Aragon in 1263 who, after permitting the Dominicans to compel Jewish attendance at their sermons, reversed himself by limiting the circumstances and locations in which such sermons could take place. James also forbade the friars to take Christian laymen with them "for fear that they might be incited to riot" (Cohen, p. 84). Such warnings to the friars were repeated by James' successors in Aragon, Peter III and James II. Peter IV of Aragon even censured Dominicans and Franciscans for inflammatory sermons that led to the murder of Jews and the confiscation of their property. Philip IV notified his bailiffs not to aid the friars in an unlawful manner and even had copies distributed of Pope Gregory X's edition (from 1274) of the encyclical *Turbato corde*, which, while allowing inquisitorial jurisdiction over

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relapsed Jewish converts to Christianity, restricted access to the Jews who hadn't converted. Yitzhak Baer's comment (in his *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* [Philadelphia, 1961], vol. 1, p. 178) remains valid: "During this period [13th century Aragon at the end of the Reconquest] the right of the Jews to their own existence was still recognized. Even after the close of the Reconquest the state still needed the Jews for the large revenues it derived from them in a variety of ways."

Chazan's volume is based in large part on his earlier studies of Christian missionary efforts in the 13th century and Jewish responses thereto (Chazan, pp. 212-213). The opening chapters of his volume deal with the pre-13th century Christian mission, which it is claimed "shows almost no evidence of serious proselytizing among the Jews" (p. 21) and fails to address issues of contemporary Jewish life even as it relies, for the most part, on the time-worn and unconvincing "proof texts" from Scripture. Harbingers of what was to come in the 13th century are already seen in the writings of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny (1092-1156) who emphasizes "the nullity of Juda-

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ism and the debased state of its adherents combined with the . . . prospect of converting these obstinate and unfortunate beings to a vision of the truth" (p. 23). Peter prefigures the revised Christian mission in the century following his death when the friars make a sustained effort to learn Judaic texts in the Hebrew original and gain a respectable familiarity with the Talmud. Chazan correctly points out that the Christian mission to the Jews needs to be seen in the wider context of the Church's agenda in the 13th century. Unified, powerful and confident, the Church, in this century, while enjoying unparalleled prestige and influence is at the same time beset with intramural discord and domestic heresies, not to mention the ever present threat from a belligerent Muslim force determined to wage its righteous struggle ( *Jihad* ) and spread the rule of Islamic law. To combat the danger from the latter, the friars, led by Raymond of Penafort (d. 1275), labored to gain a knowledge of Arabic and an acquaintance with Islamic literature to proselytize among the Muslims. From their efforts to gain converts among the Muslims, the attention of the friars turned to the Jews living among them. Chazan offers the following reasons why the Church couldn't overlook the Jews in its missionary efforts, although the latter didn't present nearly as much of a threat as the more powerful Muslim forces: "To overlook the Jews would be to court danger. In a society committed to enhanced clarification of the demands of Christian living and to more exacting fulfillment of these demands, the issue of the Jews resident within Christendom, while not a priority of the highest order, had to be addressed. Beyond this, there was the ongoing sense that the Jews represented a muted, continuous reproach to Christians. Given the combination of certainty and insecurity . . . there was renewed sensitivity to the age-old question of how those people most directly conversant with God's initial revelation could fail to read its implications correctly . . . Finally, there is an element of the irrational as well . . . Irrational suggestions about Jewish malevolence and power had already begun to circulate in the 12th century. During the 13th century, these stereotypes proliferated, raising wholly unrealistic fears of potential harm that might flow from the Jews" (p. 30).

This list should be added to the emerging perception of the Jews as having been corrupted by the teachings of the Talmud, which Pope Gregory IX condemned (in 1239) as "the chief cause that holds the Jews obstinate in their perjury." In this new perception a distinction is made between the "biblical" Jews whom Augustine wished to tolerate and the contemporary rabbinic Jew who has misinterpreted the authentic scriptural reference (Cohen, pp. 242-243). The fears of potential harm flowing from the Jews is for-

malized in the bull *Sicut Iudeis* issued by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), which limits the rights of Jews in Christendom to those "who have not presumed to plot against the Christian faith."

A "new style" (Chazan, p. 38) Christian missionary effort to the Jews occurs in 1242, the year of the public burning of the Talmud in Paris. A royal edict from King James I of Aragon led to what was to become the established practice of forcing Jews (and Muslims) to listen to the sermons of the friars bringing "the good news" of the Christian message. Jewish reaction to being forced to attend conversionist sermons is reflected in the polemical work *Milhemet Misvah* by Meir ben Samuel of Narbonne in which the latter argues that forcing Jews to listen to Christian sermonizing is "a flagrant violation of the basic safeguards historically assured by Christendom" to its Jewish minority

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(Chazan, p. 43). And that among these safeguards is the assumption that Christian rulers have guaranteed the Jews the right to practice their religious traditions as they understand them. The key passage in the *Milhemet Misvah*, quoted by Chazan (p. 41) is given in the Jewish rebuttal to the Christian argument: "Indeed you are commanded to protect us and to preserve us in your midst by guarding our religion according to our faith, so that you not cause us to transgress one of the commandments of the Torah, according to our understanding of its meaning (italics mine)." The latter is a most significant and far-reaching understanding of the rights of the Jewish minority in Christian Europe and it is regrettable that there is no trace of it in contemporary Christian sources.

From Meir b. Samuel's *Milhemet Misvah* there is evidence the friars were using rabbinic sources in their missionizing efforts. Following are two examples (quoted by Chazan, p. 69): The priest asked: "Why do you not place purple thread on your fringes, as it is written in your Torah: 'Let them attach a chord of blue to the fringe at each corner (Num. 15:38)'?" The priest asked: It is written in your Torah: 'From the day after the sabbath . . . you must count 50 days (Lev. 23:15-16).' Why do you go to great lengths to explain this verse and to remove it seemingly from its simple meaning, saying that

there are only 49 days and that the 50th day is not included in the reckoning." These arguments show not only a familiarity with rabbinic teaching but reflect the argumentation of the Karaites in their polemics with Rabbanites. The degree, if any, to which the friars made use of Karaite polemics isn't mentioned in Chazan's study, although there is an opinion that Nicholas Donin, the Jewish convert to Christianity in his charges against the Talmud, may have used Karaite materials (Cohen, pp. 61-62).

Chazan makes much of the "new line of (Christian) missionizing argumentation . . . advanced first in the 1240s and 1250s." (p. 68). In this "new" argumentation the friars bring a knowledge of rabbinic sources in advancing their missionizing efforts. In support of this thesis, Chazan cites the mid-13th-century Commentary on the *Aggadot of the Talmud* by Isaac ben Yedaiah in which the following exchange (quoted by Chazan, pp. 69-70) takes place between the Rabbi and one of the Christian sages: "(He asked me) and disputed with me as to why we remain obstinate concerning the King Messiah, who came, in their view, to lead the new faith that had been initiated for them. They argue strenuously through their (the rabbi's) words and all similar statements that they (the rabbis), of blessed memory, foresaw their faith and gave testimony that the Messiah *had come* (italics mine) and that he led them in the city of Rome. (The Christian sage then asked:) . . . what else their (the rabbis') intention was and what else they proposed to teach us when they said, concerning the Messiah, that he created in their days and went to Rome."

The rabbinic statement referred to by the Christian sage is from Bavli Sanhedrin 98a: "R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah . . . (and) asked him: 'When will the Messiah come?' — 'Go and ask him himself,' was his reply. 'Where is he sitting?' — 'At the entrance of the city of Rome.'" However, it is far from certain this use of the said legend in Bavli Sanhedrin for missionizing purposes was "advanced first" in the 1240s and 1250s. It is likely Rashi (died in 1105, in Troyes) already was aware that a legend proclaiming the Messiah's arrival in Rome could be used to advance the Christian missionizing argument, and may have been employed for just this purpose in Rashi's own day. Otherwise, why would he go out of his way to interpret this legend allegorically (in his commentary to Bavli Sanhedrin 98a: "At the entrance of the city,") as follows: "(The Messiah was not sitting in person) at the entrance of the city, but was stationed in the Garden of Eden and in the part of the Garden which faces the gate of the city."

From the writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra (died 1167), who traveled widely in Christian Europe, there is reference to the

debate on the question of whether the Messiah already had come. In Ibn Ezra's commentary to Isaiah 52:13 he writes: "My servant shall prosper," — those who debate with us (i.e. the Christians) say that this refers to their God (i.e. Jesus of Nazareth)... and there are many who interpret (the phrase 'my servant') as a reference to the Messiah, because of the statement by the Sages (in Lamentations Rabbah 1.51 and in Pesiqta 37) that on the day that the temple was destroyed the Messiah was born and he was bound in chains, but there is no substance to these citations." The "many who interpret" is probably a reference to Christians who are familiar with rabbinic sources and use them for their polemical purposes well before the 1240s and 1250s. The question of whether the Messiah already had come also figures prominently in Ibn Ezra's *ge'ulah*, "I mo'ivai yomru ra li" (possibly composed for Rosh Hashanah) in which he writes: "When my enemies speak evilly of me and I think that my foot has given way —, the God of Abraham is my strength and the Fear of Isaac is with me... Would that I could associate with Daniel, the precious man... I would ask him when the redemption will come and ascertain if it had already occurred or if the prophecies are yet to be fulfilled" (Cf. *The Religious Poems of Abraham Ibn Ezra*, ed. I. Levin [Jerusalem, 1980], vol. 2, pp. 25-26, lines 1-2, 13, 15-16). Reflected in this liturgical work of Ibn Ezra's is a debate with his enemies (i.e. the Christians) who argue the Messiah already had come, as Israel Levin correctly points out in his commentary to the poem: "If it had already passed: '— If, according to my enemies, the promised time for my redemption has passed because the prophecies have been fulfilled during the time of the Second Temple and are not destined to be realized again.'"

Chazan elaborates on the "new missionizing argumentation" and "the serious challenge" (p. 86) it presented and focuses on the Barcelona disputation of 1263 and its leading figures Friar Paul Christian and Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides). In the course of the debate Friar Paul, in support of his position that the Messiah already had come, cites the rabbinic account telling of the birth of the Messiah at the time of the destruction of the Temple (mentioned above). To this Nahmanides replies: "Behold it says that, on the day of the destruction, after the Temple was destroyed, on that very day the Messiah was born. Thus, Jesus isn't the Messiah as you say, for he was born and killed prior to the destruction of the Second Temple. Indeed his birth was in fact approximately 200 years prior to the destruction of the Temple (according to Jewish reckoning in Abraham Ibn Daud, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah*, ed. G.D. Cohen [Philadelphia, 1967], 15-16 [Hebrew text] and 20-21 [English transla-

tion]), and even according to your reckoning it was 73 years earlier." (Cf. Moses ben Nahman, *Kitvei Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. Ch. Chavel [Jerusalem, 1971], vol. 1, 306).

To this argument of Nahmanides one of the friars replied: "The debate does not now concern Jesus. The question is only if the Messiah has come or not. You say that he has not come and this book of yours says that he has come," (cf. *Kitvei*, vol. 1, 306, and Chazan, p. 94). When further pressed on the question of whether the Messiah had come as related in the rabbinic legend (*aggadah*) Rabbi Moses replied: "I do not believe in this rabbinic legend," (cf. *Kitvei*,

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vol. 1, 306). In describing this exchange, Chazan observes (on page 96): "It must be remembered that ultimately both Friar Paul and Nahmanides were addressing a Jewish audience, an audience for which a broad disavowal of rabbinic *aggadot* would be — as it was for Nahmanides himself — difficult to accept." Chazan's statement here is troubling. Why would a Jewish audience find it difficult to accept a disavowal of rabbinic legends given there is ample support for the position of Nahmanides on this issue from the opinion of R. Zeira in the name of Samuel (in Yerushalmi Peah, 2.6): "One does not deduce facts from rabbinic legends," — a view shared by Rav Hai Gaon and by Rav Sherirah Gaon (cf. *Osar Ha-Geonim*, ed. B.M. Levin [Haifa-Jerusalem, 1928-1943], *Hagigah*, #67-#68).

It is also unclear from Chazan's account why Nahmanides himself found it "difficult to accept" a disavowal of *aggadot*. For an opinion on this question it is necessary to consult Jeremy Cohen's study where Nahmanides' dilemma is considered in the context of his known views on rabbinic legends. Following is Cohen's observation (p.119): "Nahmanides distinction between Talmudic law, binding upon all orthodox Jews, on the one hand, and midrash, which any Jew could freely reject, on the other, appears to diverge sharply from his otherwise essentially anti-rationalist outlook. Throughout his biblical commentaries and mystical writings, Nahmanides commonly assumed and asserted the basic truth of the *aggadah*, in order to justify his typological understanding of history and kabbalistic theology. Moreover, he insisted that *agga-*

*dot*, like scripture, never be interpreted completely allegorically, so as to detach their symbolic interpretation from their literal meaning in obvious preference for the former."

Chazan correctly observes that the missionary efforts of Friar Raymond Martin, successor to Friar Paul Christian, is more careful and sophisticated than the latter's. However, Chazan is unconvincing on how serious a threat Friar Raymond posed to the Jewish community. Saul Lieberman observed that, although it isn't likely Friar Raymond forged the rabbinic texts in his anthology, his "incorrect reading of those texts betray a characteristic not commonly found among Jews who are familiar with rabbinic literature," and gives several examples in support of this view. (Cf. S. Lieberman, *Shiqin* [Jerusalem, 1970], p.45). How serious a threat Friar Raymond was to the Jews depends on whether one agrees (as does Chazan, following Jeremy Cohen and Yitzhak) that the polemical dialogue between Jew and Christian from the pen of Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret (Rashba) (ca. 1235-1310) of Barcelona (cf. J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adret: Sein Leben und seine Schriften* [Breslau, 1863] Heb. p. 24-56) is directed against the argumentation of Friar Raymond. Given there are only "occasional similarities in subject matter between the *Pugio Fidei* and Adret's polemical tract" (Cohen, pp. 156-157) it is far from certain the Christian protagonist in Ibn Adret's dialogue reflects the views of Raymond Martin.

In support of his position, Chazan notes that Friar Raymond employs both *aggadic* and *halakhic* materials in support of his missionary efforts, much like the Christian protagonist in Ibn Adret's polemical tract who argues as follows: "Some of the commandments they explain literally, but they claim that they are not of intrinsic significance and are only forms intended to hint at future events. When the future event is realized, the commandments which prefigured it are annulled. One of the commandments which they include in this category is the commandment of the paschal sacrifice, which is a memento intended to hint at what they claim later took place. Some of them bring proof from what is said in Tractate Qiddushin, in the chapter Ha-Ish Meqadesh: 'And all the aggregate community of the Israelites shall slaughter it (Exodus 12:6). This teaches that all Israel fulfills the obligation with one paschal offering (Bavli, Qiddushin 42a).' With what paschal offering will all Israel fulfill its obligation? Surely that special paschal offering." (cf. Perles, p. 31 and Chazan, pp. 147-148). However, given Friar Raymond's extensive corpus of rabbinic sources one would expect to find this *halakhic* reference among its numerous cita-

tions, but one doesn't. Chazan is correct in observing the Christian protagonist in Ibn Adret's tract possessed an "excellent command of difficult *halakhic* material" (Chazan, p. 151), but it doesn't follow that this protagonist is to be identified with Friar Raymond who, as S. Liebermann observed (cited above), was flawed in his understanding of rabbinic texts.

The 13th century Christian missionizing effort and the Jewish response is a fascinating and complex subject. Robert Chazan deserves our thanks for enlarging our understanding of the argumentations and rebuttals. The definitive work on the issues, however, remains to be written.

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## Hooked on Academic Freedom and Integrity

*Convictions*  
by Sidney Hook  
Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus  
Books

A Review Essay by  
Peter Vallentyne

Sidney Hook, philosopher and prolific writer, died in 1989 at the age of 86. During his lifetime he published more than 20 anthologies, 30 books and 500 articles. He wrote on a wide range of topics, but his main (overlapping) focuses were (1) Marxism, democracy, freedom and equality; (2) academic freedom and integrity; and (3) the philosophy of John Dewey and pragmatism.

*Convictions* is a collection of 29 previously published essays that represent Hook's most deeply held views. All but three of the essays were first published in the 1970s and 1980s (and mostly the latter). The three exceptions are "The Ethics of Suicide" (1972), "Reflections on the Jewish Question" (1949) and "The Faiths of Whittaker Chambers" (1952, a review of a book by Chambers on the communist movement in America). There are opening and closing essays, one on Jewishness and anti-semitism, three articles on death (provision of expensive medical treatment for the elderly, euthanasia and suicide), eight on politics (democracy, equality, freedom and communism) and 15 on university education (the

curriculum and academic freedom).

Sidney Hook wasn't afraid to go against the current. He was Jewish by birth, but — from age 13 — atheist by conviction. When a communist, he was critical of the totalitarianism of Leninism. When an anti-communist, he was openly critical of Senator McCarthy's demagoguery (e.g., in a 1953 letter to the New York Times). And, in the last 10 years of his life he argued against the growing acceptance at universities of preferential hiring and admission practices, restrictions on freedom of expression to deal with problems of racial and sexual harassment, and changes in the curriculum concerning race, gender and class issues.

It is to the last set of arguments that I now turn. Or rather, it is to the arguments as they appear in *Convictions* that I now turn. Hook has written widely on these issues, so I shall only be considering a subset of the arguments he has offered. My goal isn't to refute his arguments for his position, but rather to identify some of the issues that deserve more consideration than he gives them in *Convictions*. Because of space limitations, I shall not consider his opposition to strong forms of affirmative action.

In response to recent problems of verbal racial, sexual and ethnic harassment many universities have adopted harassment policies restricting freedom of speech. Hook firmly opposed such policies. We can agree with Hook that such policies shouldn't restrict the expression of a view — no matter what its content — if it is expressed in a *minimally intimidating manner in a context of rational inquiry*. Some views — such as that African Americans are less intelligent than white Americans — may be intimidating in virtue of their content, but in a context of rational inquiry that isn't a good reason for restricting their expression. True views may be intimidating. At a university we should be constantly challenging views so as to achieve truth. In a forum of rational discussion restrictions based on content are, therefore, inappropriate.

If restrictions are appropriate, they must be based on the manner or context in which views are expressed — not the content of the views. A given view can be expressed in a variety of ways, and it may be appropriate to restrict its expression in needlessly intimidating manners (such as "nigger" or "faggot" instead of "blacks" or "African American," or "homosexual" or "gay"). Likewise, restrictions on the content of speech when such speech isn't part of a context of rational discussion (as in a taunt from the street of "Nice legs!" or "Women aren't as smart as men!") also may be justifiable. Because the university is a center of critical inquiry, it must foster an atmosphere in which intimidation is minimized. For that reason, some restrictions on verbal harass-

ment — if they help promote an atmosphere in which all feel free to critically examine ideas (and of course they may not!) — may well be justified. Hook, however, doesn't discuss these intricacies in the book.

With respect to the disruption of classes or talks, I agree entirely with Hook that it is wrong. (And of course the view expressed in the class or talk is not the view expressed in the class or talk itself, one can find a forum, perhaps a demonstration, in which to criticize the view. Physical harassment shouldn't be used to put down a view.)

What about campaigning against inviting, or in favor of canceling an invitation to, controversial speakers (such as Jeane Kirkpatrick or Henry Kissinger)? Hook thought such campaigns were wrong on the grounds that all views must be heard. There seems, however, to be at least three distinct sorts of cases. One is where it is simply the view that is controversial, and not the speaker's past acts or manner of presentation. Here we can agree with Hook that it is wrong to campaign against an invitation. For if it is only the view that is problematic, a campaign against the invitation is a campaign against the opportunity to examine critically an idea. And that isn't appropriate at a university. Of course, publicly criticizing the views — perhaps while the person is on campus — is another matter, and is entirely justifiable.

A second sort of case is where the person typically speaks in a significantly intimidating manner (e.g., with lots of slurs against Jews, women or blacks). Here a campaign against the invitation may be entirely appropriate, and the rationale is the same as the rationale for a harassment policy restricting needlessly intimidating speech on campus. Needlessly intimidating speech interferes with the university's mission of critical inquiry.

A third sort of case is where the person has engaged in grossly immoral acts (such as systematic violence against Jews, women or blacks). Here too a campaign against an invitation is entirely appropriate. For an invitation bestows at least some honor from the university on the person, and the members of the university may not wish to do this. Of course, the group issuing the invitation shouldn't simply give in to group pressure. They have a right to invite anyone they want to campus to speak (as long as it isn't needlessly intimidating) and the university should recognize and protect that right. But that is no reason for those opposed not to voice their opposition.

The second big issue Hook addressed over the years is academic integrity as it concerns how professors teach their courses and the content of general education curriculum requirements. Hook was vehemently opposed to using the university as an instrument of social change. The purpose of the university, he holds, is critical inquiry — not



social change.

According to Hook, "cultural leftists" hold that all teaching is indoctrination — there is no objective truth — and good teaching is simply indoctrination for a classless society. There are, of course, some leftists who hold this view, but I would be surprised if they were more than a very small minority. In any case, even teachers — on the right and left — who believe in objective truth can be guilty of teaching by indoctrination.

Indoctrination in the pejorative sense relevant here is the influencing of people's beliefs by non-rational means (such as giving a threatening look when the wrong view is expressed) or by intellectually dishonest means (such as not raising important objections to one's favored view, or failing to even discuss alternative views). Hook is certainly right that indoctrination in the classroom in this sense is wrong.

We can agree further with Hook (and the American Association of University Professors) that the faculty and administration have an obligation to ensure that the classroom isn't used as a forum for indoctrination. Teachers who insist on indoctrinating shouldn't be allowed to teach.

But it's not clear, as Hook seems to think it is, that professors of literature, for example, are indoctrinating if they bring up issues of racism, sexism, classism or imperialism in discussing their texts. For if done properly, there will be little non-rational or intellectually dishonest influence. And such issues can certainly shed light on a work. Of course, there are limits. If in a general course on Latin American literature a professor spent a whole semester on racism and never discussed a single piece of Latin American literature that would be intellectually irresponsible. But the mere fact that political issues (such as racism, etc.) are systematically raised in courses (such as literature courses) that historically haven't included such discussions doesn't establish that indoctrination is taking place. Whether teaching is indoctrination depends on how it is done.

The last issue I will consider is the Western culture curricular requirement many universities have. This requirement typically requires students to take specific courses that focus on the great texts of the Western tradition (of Plato, Shakespeare, etc.). In recent years there has been agitation on many campuses (such as Stanford's) by some students and faculty to replace this requirement with one that requires courses on both Western and non-Western culture, often with emphasis on issues of racism, sexism and imperialism. Hook was strongly opposed to any such change. For he held that this was but one more example of "cultural leftists" using the university as an instrument of social change by imposing their political

agenda on all students.

There are a number of intertwined issues here. The first is: Should there be any general education requirements at all? Hook rightly held there are certain broad categories of inquiry to which all liberal arts students should have some exposure. Whether this is best achieved by imposing general education requirements (as opposed to simply ensuring that most courses promote this goal) is more controversial. But let's assume there should be some general education requirements.

***If restrictions (on freedom of expression) are appropriate, they must be based on the manner or context in which views are expressed — not the content of the views.***

A second issue is: Should there be a Western cultural general education requirement? Again Hook rightly held the affirmative view. One of the broad areas of which liberal arts students should have some knowledge is the important texts and ideas of their country's heritage. And Hook rightly denied that Western culture requirements imply the superiority of Western values, or of the status quo. Within the Western tradition there are subtraditions with radically different values and beliefs. Many of these subtraditions — such as Marxism — are very critical of the status quo in the West. There is much dissent within the Western tradition, and teachers of Western culture courses can, and perhaps should, bring these out. Furthermore, although many of our great texts do contain elements (sometimes significant elements) of racism, sexism, etc. (and this is just as true of other cultures as well), examining such texts doesn't imply that such views are correct. On the contrary, an examination of such texts can, and should, include the identification and discussion of such views. So merely having a Western culture requirement — even in the absence of a non-Western culture requirement — doesn't imply the superiority of the Western tradition, nor does it endorse the racism, sexism, etc. of many of the texts. It only implies that knowledge of the Western culture is especially important for Western students.

A third issue is: Should there be a world, or non-Western, culture requirement? Hook rightly held that (a) it was desirable that students acquire knowledge of other cultures, and (b) that this was less important than acquiring knowledge of their own cultural heritage. We should note immediately, however, that for American students — more than 20 percent of whom have Asian, African

or Latin American heritages — knowledge of American cultural heritage requires knowledge of non-Western cultures. So the apparent conflict between non-Western culture and the students' cultural heritage is largely illusory in the American context. The very same rationale that supports a Western culture requirement (the importance of knowledge of one's heritage) also supports — but to a lesser extent — a non-Western culture requirement. For that reason, it's not clear to me that a non-Western culture requirement is inappropriate.

A fourth issue is: For required courses in Western culture (or the Western-culture component of required world culture courses) is it appropriate to replace some of the classic texts with less significant works of the Western tradition by women or people of color? Presumably, Hook allowed that some less known texts may in fact be more significant. And so presumably he was open to the possibility we might discover that past works of women or people of color are more significant than we have taken them to be. But he was clearly opposed to adding texts simply because they are by women or people of color. Students should, he claimed, study the great works of our civilization, and the race or sex of the authors is irrelevant.

Of course, what factors determine the significance of a work is very controversial. Historical influence? Artistic merit in some abstract sense? Usefulness in helping us understand our present and past culture? Hook seemed to hold, and I agree, that all three of these factors (and probably others) are relevant for decisions about what texts are studied. But if that is so, and Hook didn't seem to recognize this, then there may well be good grounds for including texts of women and people of color — even when they are historically less influential and have less artistic merit. For sometimes hearing a voice that hasn't been historically influential can be very effective in helping us understand our past and present culture. For example, if along with historically influential works of a given period, one also reads works of women and minorities, one could examine how they differed in outlook and why that was so.

So historical influence and artistic merit aren't everything, and it may well be appropriate to replace some more influential works with less influential works. And this is because the goal of a Western culture requirement isn't merely knowledge of the great works of the past, but also knowledge of our past and present traditions in all their forms.

As should be apparent, I am critical of a number of Hook's views. But on one point at least, I am in admiration. There are growing social pressures on American campuses to take the concerns and perspectives of women and people of color

much more seriously than has been done in the past. On the whole I think this is good, but often these pressures reach the point of dogmatism and intolerance. It is important that those opposing the prevailing tendency not be bullied into silence. We constantly must be challenged to defend our views and practices — no matter how clearly correct they seem. For that reason Sidney Hook has performed a great service by publicly challenging what he sees as unhealthy tendencies.

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## Genesis and Semiosis: Structural Reading of a Biblical Book

*The Elusive Covenant: A  
Structural-Semiotic Reading of  
Genesis*

by Terry J. Prewitt  
Bloomington: Indiana  
University Press

A Review Essay by  
Peter J. Haas

This book offers an excellent view into the world of structural and semiotic literary analysis. In this regard, the subtitle of the book is misleading. This slim volume doesn't present a single structural-semiotic reading of Genesis, but rather a collection of different types of methodologically informed readings of the same text. The results of the author's different probes are both strikingly diverse and yet roughly compatible with each other. This is why, I assume, the author has chosen the foretitle: an "elusive" covenant. It is the author's contention that there are in the end numerous ways of eliciting meaning from Genesis. He sets out to show us what some of these are if one adopts the hermeneutical stance associated with contemporary literary criticism. The outcome is a fascinating rereading of what we thought were the well-known stories of the text. Prewitt adduces a side of these Biblical texts that is quite different from what the received hermeneutical traditions have provided.

The book offers four different readings of Genesis, each of which exploits, and so illuminates, a particular structural or semiotic characteristic of the text at hand. The first, foray, focussing on genealogies, adduces

the social patterns of Genesis and thereby also the social definition of "Israel." Drawing heavily on the work of Edmund Leach, Prewitt comes to conclusions that are in striking alignment with anthropological and archaeological conclusions of recent years about the social dimension making Israel a distinct people in the pre-Monarchic period (for example, in the writings of Frank Frick, Niels Lemche and Israel Finkelstein, to name a few). These theories see Israel not as a preformed and preexistent lineage group that imposed itself on the region, but rather as a group that only gradually achieved a consciousness of self-definition. Prewitt's readings show that Genesis too can yield this result.

The second chapter looks at what the author terms "mythscapes." The goal here is to place the tribes and peoples of Genesis into geographic and thereby geometric relationships. This chapter, as the previous one, describes the problems of Israelite territoriality, kingship and peoplehood in a way that is unprecedented among the received literary interpretations of the text but which do confirm anthropological and social reconstructions of the formation of early Israel.

Chapter three is entitled "Structural Hermeneutics" and is devoted to charting out the rhetorical structure of the book as a whole. To pull off this kind of large-scale analysis, one must assume the authorship of Genesis has tightly controlled such elements as genealogy, territory and social organization. Taking this assumption for granted, Prewitt argues in this chapter that the author of Genesis has used these elements so as to solve the social contradictions inherent in Israelite life, especially those associated with lines of lineage and succession.

The fourth chapter, "Mythos and Ethos," works out of the assumption that the diverse individual substories making up Genesis are in effect microcosms of the whole. Thus the tale surrounding the relationship of Judah of Tamar and its aftermath, for example, are taken to be structurally congruent with the social and genealogical patterns worked out in the macrocosm defined in Genesis. The Judah-Tamar story simply works out the implications of Genesis' overall universe as it applies to one particular case. Taken together, the various marriage and alliance themes in Genesis are treated, then, as structural variations of each other that in sum represent a systematic application of the same values over different examples. The inspiration of this chapter clearly comes from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

What makes this collection of examples so compelling is the great care and detail that has gone into crafting each of them. In many ways the book can be read as a kind of textbook on how one might carry

through various kinds of structural analyses. Prewitt carefully lays out the theoretical background that informs each probe, leads the reader through his analysis step by step and provides charts and graphs on the way as needed. It is because of the great care and internal consistency of each individual chapter that the overall coherence of the four taken together is so remarkable. The individual conclusions, each reached on its own, dovetail beautifully to create a more or less single picture of the internal structure of Israelite society as adduced through a variety of literary perspectives.

The other side of this clarity is that it places in stark relief before the reader the foundational assumptions on which the study rests. There seems to me to be two areas of concern in particular which the present study raises. While Prewitt himself is aware of these questions, his handling of them is far from adequate, and they therefore bring the entire enterprise into methodological question. The first has to do with the nature of the text itself, in this case the book of Genesis. Is it really the unified piece of work which much of the analysis requires? The second has to do with the epistemological status of the results that Prewitt produces. Each of these questions is important enough to warrant some discussion.

Let me begin with the question about the nature of the book. It is commonplace among critical scholars that Genesis is not a single coherent work put together by one author. It is seen rather as an "artificial" composition built out of at least three prior "documents": J, E and P. These prior documents themselves derive from different centuries (9th, 8th and 6th, respectively) and from various contexts (Judah, Israel, post-Exilic Judea, respectively). The question then is how legitimate is it to take a composite work of this kind and adduce from it a single convictional pattern for "Israel"?

One way of dealing with this, of course, is to deny the Documentary Hypothesis altogether. This option is certainly open to Prewitt, but he does not choose to exercise it. In fact, at several points, he acknowledges the existence and acceptability of the Documentary Hypothesis. His claim is, that despite the diverse sources and late redaction of the received text, Genesis as we have it is still a unitary entity.

Another possibility at this point is to adopt a Lévi-Straussian approach and argue that the time and venue of each individual component story is immaterial since together they are all variations of a single underlying mythic universe. This assertion, I believe, will not serve here. Prewitt is not, after all, trying to derive general human mythic truths from the stories of Genesis. He is out to show, rather, that certain quite specific social assumptions govern the character of

Genesis' world. The content of these social assumptions is described in such detail that one wonders if Levi-Strauss' thesis that all myths are variations on a theme is really applicable. We are dealing after all at this level with specifics of social relationships, not with mythic structures. It seems rather unlikely that precisely the same notions of marriage, succession and tribal lineage could be operative in pre-Monarchic Israel, the time of Solomon, the Kingdom of Judah and the post-Exilic community of Judea. From most other evidence, we find these to be rather distinct societies. It is arguably legitimate to assume that different alliance stories from, say, the period of the Kingdom are all variations of a particular culture-wide understanding; it is considerably harder to justify the assertion that stories from the Kingdom are systematically congruent in detail with assumptions common in the pre-Monarchic period on the one hand and the Persian period on the other, even should it turn out that these diverse communities share in a common "Israelite" myth.

The composite character of Genesis is especially a problem, it seems to me, when Prewitt is doing his large-scale, macrocosmic analysis. He seem to have discovered literary structures that systematically undergird parts of Genesis and can be traced in a vast and complete grid throughout the book. While his argument on one level is compelling, one wonders how this is possible if the book is in fact a composite as he accepts it to be elsewhere. I kept wondering whether we were seeing not the existence of actual structural elements, but the conclusions of a clever literary critic.

This leads me to my second area of concern: the epistemological status of what Prewitt has adduced. A few examples may help clarify the problem. In Chapter Two, Prewitt determines that the textual structure suggests that the tribe of Levi, as a tribe of religious functionaries, was actually created "artificially" out of existing social structures in order to provide a sort of cement for holding the newly formed Davidic social organization together. It was, then, created from the top down. Now in this same chapter Prewitt discusses Norman Gottwald's study, recognizing that his understanding of the emergence of Israel requires a "bottom up" formation of the Levites. He concludes that chapter by saying that since we cannot decide whether the structure of Genesis describes a real social situation or an idealization of what should be the case, we can never determine which process most accurately describes the historical case. I wonder if we really are ever in a position to claim that such literary analysis gives us data as to the "historical case" as opposed to how the authorship supposed or wanted things to be. That is, I have a hard time putting the results of

literary analysis on the same level of historical reliability as archeological evidence, for example.

Note, for example, the structure of wife-taking in the Abraham narrative. Prewitt concludes after a series of analyses of various characters that before the Covenant of Circumcision, men could take wives from other groups but after the covenant they could not give their sisters as wives to those outside the circumcision alliance. This may, in fact, describe precisely what happens in the story, but is this an accurate and reliable picture of Israel's social history? Prewitt seems to say yes. He is willing to concede readily that the narrative itself might not be history properly speaking, but the social relationships structured by the text are, he is willing to aver, accurate reflections of Israel's actual social history. Prewitt claims to observe features in this late text that characterize the emergent social structure of "Israel" in the time of David.

At the end of Chapter Four, Prewitt in fact reflects on the epistemological status of

his inquiry. He is arguing in particular against people who read the Bible in an uncritical, literal sort of way and then use the results of their reading to make moral judgments about others. Prewitt does not want to engage in such simplistic moralizing. He is willing to concede that his conclusions are interpretations allowed, but not demanded, by the text. Interpretation, he says, "is not simply a matter of structure, but is instead that activity wherein we allow our minds to move beyond structure to implication, and from implication to a total experience." (p. 126) We must wonder then at the end of this marvelous exposition of structural methodologies if we after all have been studying Biblical Israel, the book of Genesis, or Terry Prewitt. In any case, the experience was exhilarating.

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## Book Briefings

*Emory Studies on the Holocaust: An Interfaith Inquiry. Volume 2. Edited by Sue M. Hanover and David R. Blumenthal. Witness to the Holocaust Project, Emory University.* This is the second volume of Holocaust studies published by Emory, consisting of 11 essays which include taped interviews of personal accounts and scholarly studies of interfaith issues related to the Holocaust. It is an admirable work combining both subjective involvement and objective research.

*Whispers in the Darkness. By Sam and Anna Goldenberg. Shengold Publishers, Inc.* This is the story of the Goldenbergs and their near-miraculous survival during the Holocaust. They tell how they were taken in by the Kucer family, humane and courageous Czechs living in the heart of the Ukraine, hidden for 15 months in an underground bunker; how they escaped starvation and treachery, often by mere chance; how they emerged again only to find their troubles were not over as they wandered throughout Europe in search of a home; and how they were able to create a new life for themselves out of the remnants of the old.

*The Elephant and My Jewish Problem. By Hugh Nissenson. Harper & Row Publishers.* This is an eloquent, carefully constructed collection of fiction and journal excerpts dramatizing the Jewish experience during this century in America, Europe and Israel. In it the author explores the quest for faith and redemption in the face of evil. The journals, woven together with the stories, begin with an account of the Eichman trial in Israel in 1961 and culminate with the trial of Klaus Barbie in Lyon in 1987.

*Love Peace and Pursue It: A Jewish Response to War and Nuclear Annihilation. By Bradley S. Arison. United Synagogue of America.* This volume presents a thorough analysis of Jewish traditions on the value of life, the nature of heroism, and application of moral standards to warfare. By means of a comprehensive explanation of the various categories of war, and drawing liberally on biblical, rabbinic, and modern sources, the author enables the reader to evaluate the morality of the ultimate threat to human survival.

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## Book Briefings

**The Other Jews: The Sephardim Today.** By Daniel J. Elazar. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers. In this major study of the Sephardim, the author brilliantly recreates the uniquely rich heritage of this important part of Judaism and provides a compelling, comprehensive portrait of Sephardic communities and cultures the world over. He points to a rich and continuing tradition of family, learning, and achievement which, thanks to demographic trends and a restoration of the political balance of power in Israel and elsewhere, will exert an increasing influence on Jewish life, even as the 1000-year division between Sephardim and Ashkenazim comes to an end under the new conditions of life in Israel and the Diaspora.

**Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of Eastern European Jews.** By Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan. Basic Books, Inc. Of the immigrants who came to America in the first two decades of this century, those who found assimilation the most traumatic were the Jews of Eastern Europe. The authors conducted lengthy interviews with scores of men and women whose vivid memories of daily life reveal young Jews moving from a world ruled by Talmudic laws to one where the latest in scientific and social thinking held sway. This is oral history at its best - a rich and moving evocation of the Jewish immigrant experience in the early 20th Century.

**What's a Nice God Like You Doing in a Place Like This?** By Jay Stern. United Synagogue of America. Intended for the adult reader

as well as for the upper grades of the Jewish high school, the volume represents a refreshing interpretation of Midrash, replete with humor, bringing to life what many consider to be esoteric. It presents a series of midrashim and projects them as real-life situations relevant to the contemporary Jewish and general settings.

**Frankfurt on the Hudson.** By Steven M. Lowenstein. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. The 20,000 Jews who fled Hitler's Germany and settled in Washington Heights preserved their identity while fostering a culture that was still heavily German. They were the largest U. S. settlement of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. The author analyzes both the social structure of this community and the folk culture of the immigrants. He paints a picture of a unique lifestyle now in the process of merging into American Jewry and disappearing.

**A Treasury of Jewish Anecdotes.** By Lawrence J. Epstein. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc. This is a touching and instructive collection of stories about prominent and relatively unknown Jewish personalities. The author has found anecdotes that contain a kernel of truth about Judaism and how the Jewish heritage is transmitted among the Jewish people.

A helpful index allows readers to use the book to search for specific anecdotes or subjects.

Inclusion of a book in "Briefings" doesn't preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.

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PAID  
Richmond, Virginia  
Permit No. 869

Menorah Review is published by the Center for Judaic Studies and the Judaic Culture Advisory Committee of Virginia Commonwealth University in collaboration with VCU's School of Mass Communications. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome. Address all correspondence to Center for Judaic Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2025.

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